

# Providing a helping hand to private woodland owners



Members of the Women of WWOA group learning to measure tree height.

## WISCONSIN'S PRIVATE WOODLAND OWNERS WORK ON A LOCAL LEVEL.

*Caleb Klima*

Steve Ring and his father had an opportunity. In 1993, a member of their hunting club put up for sale a 175-acre woodlot in Outagamie County consisting of mixed hardwoods and excellent hunting. They were both familiar with the land, successfully hunting there since the late 1960s. They took a chance and bought the property. According to Steve, "Dad was to manage the forest and I was to maintain the equipment. Over time Dad would teach me what he knew."

A year and a half later Steve's father unexpectedly passed away and Steve was left alone with the land.

"I knew nothing about sustainable forestry. My Dad was very knowledgeable and I relied on that. I was on my own," he recalls.

Debbie Schroeder-Fisher had her priorities. She was busy with a career in finances and raising a family in Appleton, but her mother needed more support taking care of their family's 440-acre woodlands in Shawano County. The woods were a significant part of their family farm that her father managed two decades earlier. After he passed,



Schroeder-Fisher, along with her sister and mother, were responsible for the land. As her mother aged it became too much for her, and the property was slowly transferred to Schroeder-Fisher and her sister.

"I was always interested in managing the woods, but I had a full-time job and was busy raising a family," she recalls. "Now I knew I had to make the right decisions."

### Wisconsin's private woodland owners

Throughout Wisconsin there are stories like Steve Ring's and Debbie Schroeder-Fisher's — people who are busy raising families and building careers — but in one way or another are also responsible for the health of woodlands. Some bought their land for a weekend retreat, others for their own hunting. The reasons are as varied as the people who own them. In fact, most of Wisconsin's woods are owned by people like them. According to the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis Program, about 9.1 million acres, or 57 percent, of Wisconsin's roughly 17 million acres of forestland are owned by 352,000 families, and the number is increasing every year.

There is a wide variety of management styles for these lands. Some owners prefer a hands-off approach, assuming

that nature knows best. Others, agreeing with Wisconsin's noted conservationist Aldo Leopold, hold a strong conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Regardless of the style, many landowners simply do not have the knowledge or experience necessary to manage their woods, or even understand why it is so important to do so.

Schroeder-Fisher expands on her story. "We were lucky to have good advice from both local DNR foresters and independent forestry consultants through the years. Then in 2012, my consulting forester surprised me with a gift membership to the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association. I had never heard of them before. I decided to check it out and attend one of their events, and I'm glad I did."

Ring echoes a similar tale, "I heard of this WWOA group, but I didn't really know how important they were. Then my logger invited me to attend a local WWOA chapter field day and it was a great experience. I met many friendly woodland owners who had a lot of collective experience and were willing to share with us. It provided me with many ideas for my woods."

The Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association is an educational nonprofit organization dedicated to helping landowners learn sustainable forestry practices and find the resources they need.

The story of WWOA reaches far back in Wisconsin history, and is a descendent of the same lineage that brought us Leopold's Land Ethic, forestry tax policies, and a national admiration for our greatest natural asset, our forestland.

### The WWOA tale

By the early 20th century most of Wisconsin's historic 22 million acres of forestland were gone, either through logging, forest fires or agricultural conversion. Many state leaders understood the importance and necessity of regenerating our woods. Wisconsin was one of the first states to pass a constitutional amendment allowing for differential taxation on forestland. That same year, in 1927, the Forest Crop Law (FCL) was passed, which allowed tax deferments on woodlands until tree harvesting. These early efforts were mainly focused on large woodland holdings, which subsequently benefited the large woodlands greatly. Many smaller private woodlands, however, were slowly degrading, while their ownership levels were continuously growing.

By the 1950s the need for more outreach and support to smaller private woodland owners was palpable. In 1954 the Woodland Tax Law (WTL) provided a tax incentive for smaller woodland parcels (in 1985 FCL and WTL were sublimated into the Managed Forest Law). A year earlier in 1953, at the Wisconsin Silver Anniversary Forestry Conference, an idea was conceived for forming an association of woodland owners. At the conference A.E. Swanke, then President of Tigerton Lumber Company, surmised what the goal of such an organization could be.

"We need to educate the woodlot owners on the importance of their part in the overall picture (of a sustainable local forest economy)," Swanke proclaimed. "The owner will discover that by practicing good forestry he will become a very integral part of a well-rounded community."

The idea incubated until 1976 when the DNR Bureau of Forestry (now Division of Forestry) applied for, and was awarded grants from the U.S. Forest Service for the purpose of forming a statewide forest landowners association to improve the management and development of privately-owned forestland. The Department of Natural Resources partnered with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Forestry to help start the new organization. By 1979, the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association was formed and a year later WWOA



NANCY BOZEK

A University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Natural Resources lecturer teaching a lesson on tree measurements with the Women of WWOA.





A consulting forester discusses the capacity of the site to grow healthy northern hardwoods at a WWOA Wolf River Chapter Field Day.

NANCY BOZEK

was designated an independent non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

### Opening doors

Today, WWOA consists of over 2,000 members across the state and has 11 chapters covering Wisconsin to provide services on a local level. The organization is governed by an 11-member board of directors and most of their programs are volunteer-driven. Every year WWOA and its chapters sponsor workshops, conferences and field days, providing a forum for landowners to share experiences, knowledge and contacts.

WWOA also produces an award-winning quarterly magazine called *Wisconsin Woodlands*, has members on state and regional boards and commissions to represent private woodland owners' interests, and provides annual scholarships to help educate the next generation of woodland owners. WWOA's purpose is to be a resource for woodland owners and instill a strong commitment to sustainable forest management.

Luckily, Ring already had the commitment; he just lacked the knowledge and experience. His WWOA membership filled the gap.

"If I never went to that first field day



An instructor provides a demonstration of a portable sawmill at a WWOA annual meeting.

NANCY BOZEK



I don't know what I would have done," Ring recalls. "WVOA has opened a lot of doors for me. I became a lifetime member almost immediately. You learn that there are many other woodland owners out there that also have a love of the land and want to do what's best for it. They're out there testing ideas and through WVOA you have the opportunity to visit their land and see it for yourself. You learn about what a forest totally encompasses, not just trees, but the air, soil, water and wildlife."

Schroeder-Fisher's experience with WVOA started at a WVOA annual meeting where she was able to meet people from across the state and learn ideas she never even thought of.

"I never heard of deer exclosures before, I think that's a really interesting experiment," she notes.

Then, she was invited to attend a meeting for the Women of WVOA, a new group formed in 2014, which really drew her interest.

"It's really neat to be with other women who enjoy the outdoors. We all get the chance to learn together and have a lot of fun," she says.

The Women of WVOA was formed to provide women landowners educational opportunities and networking in a supportive environment.

WVOA's success with educating landowners on sustainable forestry is a result of its unique educational style. WVOA relies on sharing experiences and bridging social networks, with an emphasis on adult learning that is both interactive and participatory. WVOA regularly invites natural resource professionals to share their skills and knowledge at events, thus providing a vital link for connecting woodland owners and resource professionals.

Furthermore, at WVOA field days, participants often tour properties so the landowner can show what forestry practices they implement, and the less experienced can see how the practices work over time. Field days can also include chainsaw safety training, demonstrations of forestry equipment, advice for creating wildlife habitat, lessons on tree identification and measurements, erosion control methods, fire-wise techniques and many other topics related to caring for and enjoying private woodlands.

### Gaining confidence, sharing success

Schroeder-Fisher is slowly building comfort as a woodland owner.



Debbie Schroeder-Fisher (second from left) helps lead a winter tour with fellow WVOA members along the Red River which winds through their woodlands.

SUBMITTED BY DEBBIE SCHROEDER-FISHER

"I'm not an expert by any means," she says, "but I'm learning more all the time, gaining confidence, and making many friends. I feel a lot better knowing I have WVOA as a resource."

Today, she is spending more time with her family at their property than she ever imagined.

"I always thought we'd visit several weekends a year, but now we're going up there all the time! It's a great way to bring our family together. My husband hunts turkey and deer on the property. I really enjoy snowshoeing and hiking. Nowadays my sister and I even take a tree identification book with us and are doing our best to learn what's out there."

She also shared one aspect of her WVOA membership she really appreciates.

"Estate planning, it's really important to have those conversations, however hard they may be at times," she says.

WVOA events are not just about learning forest management; they often touch on other subjects that are helpful for landowners including estate planning, taxes and legal issues and outdoor recreation.

Today, Schroeder-Fisher is also giving back to WVOA. She is a member of the Women of WVOA steering committee which plans events and provides leadership for the group. Her advice to new woodland owners or those wishing to learn more, is to join the association and go to a chapter field day. "You can choose your own level of engagement. Believe me, I know how busy life gets — just set a few priorities at a time, take some action steps, and then draw your conclusions," she says.

Ring's experience managing woodlands has come full circle. Twenty years ago he was inexperienced and nervous about his capabilities. Today, he is on

the other side of the spectrum. He regularly hosts field days, opens his land for technical college classes, and provides many tours through his woods via horse and sled while sharing his management practices. He also regularly hosts family reunions on the property to bond and create lasting memories. Ring's service with WVOA grew just as much as his forest management abilities. He served as the Wolf River Chapter president and is currently serving on the WVOA Board of Directors.

Ring would like to invite any woodland owner out there, whether they own a few acres or hundreds, to check out a WVOA event.

"Get to know what other landowners are doing and think about the health of your woods," he says. "The biggest thing is to be proactive, to try and protect your woods as much as possible."

Recently, Ring worked with three local foresters to identify at-risk trees on his land, with an emphasis on ash trees due to the spread of the emerald ash borer.

"Things like that I wouldn't know unless I went to field days and learned from others," he says. "I believe it's important to seek advice from as many sources as you can."



*Caleb Klima served the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association (WVOA) through the Volunteer Wisconsin AmeriCorps national service program.*



**To learn more about WVOA and events in your area, visit the WVOA website at [wisconsinwoodlands.org](http://wisconsinwoodlands.org). You can also contact WVOA directly at 715-346-4798 or email [wwoa@uwsp.edu](mailto:wwoa@uwsp.edu).**